

"The Battlefields and Palaces of the Crimea"
Holt's Tour; 25th May-1st June, 2010
by Dr. Douglas J. Austin



Kalamita Bay (Photo by Douglas Austin)

Having most fortunately switched our flight bookings from the strike-plagued British Airways, our Chairman, Colonel Peter Knox, led 16 brave hearts - including CWRS members Roy Dutton, Glenn Fisher, Dame Gillian Wagner and myself - from Heathrow on the Turkish Airlines flight to Istanbul. We checked in to the Peak Hotel in Pera for two nights. Some of our first warm evening was spent in walking through this immensely lively suburb to our food station, marvelling at the strolling crowds and at the traffic - which often drives down the CENTRE of the road...

Day 2: Troops rose betimes to meet Iffet (our charming Turkish lady guide) and to catch our tour bus to the Anglican (Crimean) Church, where the most worthy incumbent gave us a full description of its origin and, more importantly, of its on-going charitable work for the destitute and troubled. Off then to Scutari Barracks, the headquarters of the Turkish 1st Army, where we had to surrender our passports and avoid photography. The present barracks, impressive and immaculate with its polished marble floors, contrasted greatly with its vile and fetid condition in the winter of 1854-55. Well worth a visit, but the so-called 'Florence Nightingale Museum' was a decided let-down. Outside the restricted area, the nearby Haidar Pasha cemetery was a distinct improvement and I took photos of some 100 Crimean-era memorials in the main section. Those to tiny children were most touching. A good lunch sustained us for the visit to Hagia Sofia - now an absolute must-see museum with astounding architecture. The Upper Gallery, to which we climbed the long ramps, houses the finest mosaics I have ever seen - happily preserved by concealment during the building's use as a mosque. Next stop was the 6th-century Basilica Cistern - a massively-pillared underground world with dramatic subdued lighting - now used for exhibitions and music recitals. Of course, no Istanbul tour can be complete without a visit to the Grand Bazaar. You have never SEEN such displays of gold in the shops near the entrance! More modestly, I haggled with a carpet seller for a small prayer-mat and beat him down to one-third of his grotesque asking price! (Of course, he still made a good profit, but we are well-pleased with the product.) An excellent Turkish dinner, with a myriad of small dishes, ended the day.

Day 3: We flew to Simferopol, the capital of the Autonomous Republic of Crimea, and were joined by our guide Tatiana, a friend from the 2008 CWRS tour. We had lunch on the outskirts (just next to the world's longest trolley-bus route). Our next stop was at the Tartar Khan's palace at Bakhchisaray, which I had long hoped to see and which did not disappoint. Marvellously exotic

buildings, fountains, courtyards, carpets and embroidery (really!). Boldly and alone, I removed my shoes (a pleasure on a roasting-hot day) and entered the working mosque within the complex - exquisite. Yes, the call to prayer was tape-recorded, but wonderfully evocative nonetheless. To the bus once more and away to the rather grand Hotel Sevastopol for our three-night stay.

Day 4: Breakfast on the veranda with a stunning view of Artillery Bay on a gorgeous day - superb! We set off on a city tour with views of the magnificent harbour, the shore-line forts and gigantic WW2 memorials. Peter, of course, gave us a full run-down on the Crimean locations and events as we passed along the remaining battery lines to the Malakov Tower, of direful memory, and its interesting museum (Photo Permit: 5 hryvnia = 40p or so.). Nearby is a simple monument - over the largest mass grave - with its Russian and French inscriptions, which I translate as: "United for Victory, Reunited in Death, That is a Soldier's Glory, That is the Destiny of the Brave.". Very moving, I feel. On then, to the amazing Crimean War Panorama Museum, surrounded by roses. By happy chance, this was end-of-term day (I think) for many of the local schools, so we saw many of the pretty girls and handsome young fellows in gala costume and in celebration mode. Our day continued with a fascinating tour of the ancient Greek (later Roman) sea-port of Chersonesus, with a local Cathedral and a museum with a wildly-varied collection of medieval artifacts.

Day 5: Very early this morning, we embussed on a hot day for a long drive (and much marching) taking in Kalamita Bay and the battlefields of the Alma and Inkerman. The Great Redan at the Alma has been unduly 'smartened-up' with gravel paths, I feel, but the Inkerman area is as rough and confusing as ever. Major thanks are due to Peter for his careful elucidations. Rather tired, we returned to Sevastopol and, surprisingly, found that memorials to Lt. General Sir George Cathcart and Lt. Oliver Colt (7th Foot) have been recovered from Cathcart's Hill and set up near the British Memorial. More good fortune followed! In 2008, Mr. Alexei Sheremetiev gave us a sneak preview of his remarkable Crimean War exhibition in the submarine tunnel at Balaklava. This time, he cleared the way for us to gain very privileged and early access to the North Shore St. Michael Battery, which he is setting up as a major exhibition centre. Damaged by wars, but still most impressive. We were favoured with detailed information from the Project Consultant and explored the whole site. Pure luck, indeed!

Day 6: Balaklava Day! I readily abandoned an appointment with the local scuba-divers to take part - and glad I was to do so. Another very hot day, but the visibility was really good - cameras busy all the while. I climbed the Redoubt 4 Russian Monument (as high as I dared) to get useful photos of the terrain to north and south. We viewed all the classic locations related to the battle and to 'some charge or other' (:-). Excellent, I say, but our non-military companions may have been rather bemused by it all. A visit to the handsome Italian monument near the Tchernaya gave us illuminating views of the 'Valley of Death' from the east. Lunch was taken at the eastern end of Redoubt 4 in a newish restaurant with tremendous views of the whole battlefield - which quite made up for the toughness of the meat... Intrepid as we were - and conditioned by Peter to increasing endeavour - we climbed the rocky paths to the entrance to Balaclava harbour. The 'mature ladies' in our party put us 'younger chaps' rather to shame - no slackers among them. On our return to Sevastopol, we paid our respects at the Great Redan, another direful location, and found that part of the original British Memorial has been recovered - from No. 3, Dasha Sevastopolskaya Street - and set up in a place of honour. Quite a few surprises on this trip, as you can tell. A final pause in left-fist salute to the 'Green Ghost' WW2 rail-gun, with the locomotive still labelled 'Death to Fascists!', concluded a very satisfying day.

Day 7: Off to Yalta, collecting a second Tatiana guide and goggling at the high-perched Foros monastery on the way. We viewed Prince Voronov's Alupka Palace (designed by an English architect) - very handsome, but I preferred the gardens with great views of the coast below. Lunch was taken at the famous and vertiginous 'Swallow's Nest', now a restaurant with excellent food.

The place was built as a love-nest but, alas, never occupied as such (sigh). We were later permitted to walk the gardens of Anton Chekov's villa. The poor devil died of TB at 44 years of age - such a waste of talent. On once more, this time to the Livadia Palace, with memories of the doomed Romanovs and the (equally doomed?) Yalta Conference. The building - much better than Alupka - reminded me of Osborne House, which Nicholas II visited in happier days. A small grey cat befriended me in the garden, to general amusement. More amusement awaited me during our final Group Dinner at a splendidly exotic Tartar restaurant, when (while engaged in a photo-shoot) I was waylaid by a cheerful Ukrainian giant who forcibly obliged me to accept Ukrainian hospitality and some potent vodka with his dinner party. I was feeling no pain as I tumbled into bed in our Yalta hotel... N.B. Yalta is a sleazy tourist trap, but is highly favoured for medical establishments.

Day 8: Clear-headed and bright, in defiance of my potations, an early start saw us on the bus to Simferopol, thence by Turkish Airlines to Istanbul and, after a long and tedious wait, back to Heathrow. I ended the day tired but happy after a really great trip.

Summary: This tour nicely combined the military with the artistic.

What mark do I give it? Out of 10, I'd give it 11!